

The Awfulness of College Lectures

What do the children of privilege do when not engaging in conspicuous consumption while [wearing fashionable clothes](#)? Why attend class, of course! This bizarre, yet widespread, affectation seemed intriguing enough that I decided to pursue a further investigation in my inimitable “first-person snob” style.

The Harvard students sit patiently outside the lecture hall as they wait for the previous class to end. Many simply sit, but others, showing the go-get-it-ness that got them into Harvard, begin attempting conversation with their neighbors. The awkward situation shows through in the awkward conversation (which, no doubt, they will learn to smooth over as they get older) about superficial topics of schoolwork (never school content, of course).

As the previous class exits, we file in and take our seats. Gabbing continues somewhat for a while until, all of a sudden, as if by some mysterious consensus, it completely silences. The professor seems surprised too. “Well, uh, it got quiet all of a sudden,” he says haltingly, “so I guess I better start talking.” For a professor in social psychology, you think he’d show a little more interest.

He begins the lecture in the standard way since PowerPoint: a title slide (with a cute illustration), a table of contents slide (which he walks through interminably slowly), and then a series of chunks of text and illustrations, which he walks through one by one. It’s so bad it makes us want to tear my hair out. The content is largely superficial; the presentation is unnaturally slow. (We literally spend a good five minutes talking about a specific gross-out gag.)

But while this may be an extreme version of it, at its essence, this is the college lecture. Someone who (we’ll give them the benefit of the doubt) is quite smart appearing stupid for fifty minutes so that they can communicate basic facts to kids “at their level”. Edward Tufte teaches us to always ask about the information density of a method of communication. The information communicated in this lecture could have fit on one side of a single piece of paper.

There was a camera in the back of the hall, presumably recording the proceedings. But had this been available online, I doubt I could have forced myself to watch it. (The other day someone asked me why more people don’t watch the recordings of MIT lectures made available for free online. This is why.) The only reason the lecture is tolerable at all is because there’s something captivating about being in the presence of another human being, regardless of what they’re saying. But it doesn’t seem like that communicates anything additional — whether you see the guy in person or watch him at home, he’s still saying the same stuff. And so when you watch him at home, there’s just not much there.

So if what he’s saying isn’t very interesting, why do we subject ourselves to it? How did this become the primary method of education? Why do kids paid tens of thousands of dollars, in large part to fly someplace else to see someone say something they would have been bored to watch at home?

Back at Harvard, as I walk out of the class I hear the students gabbing. “Wow, I’m so glad I took this class,” one says. “That was the best lecture I’ve ever been in.”

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

October 3, 2006